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ABSTRACT

This report describes programs that have been developed to improve students' attention to and success with homework assignments. The four predominant types of programs, as identified through an informal survey of 100 school systems around the United States, are discussed: (1) recorded messages by voice mail; (2) live telephone homework help services; (3) live cable television shows that include on-air or behind-the-scenes telephone support for callers; (4) and drop-in homework help centers located at schools or community centers. Suggestions are included for communities considering using homework help services. A list of 23 sites offering homework help, including the name, address, and a brief description of each, is provided. (ALF)

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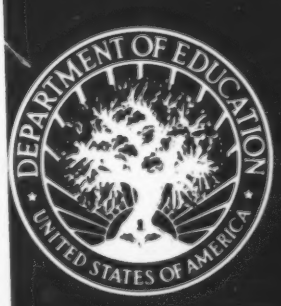
Issue Briefs

Homework Help and Home/School Communication Systems:

Examples From AMERICA 2000



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Homework Help and Home/School Communication Systems

Teachers and parents agree: doing homework every school night helps students reinforce and extend academic learning. Research basically supports this conviction, especially with respect to the middle and high school grades, where the effects of homework completion may be significant. Furthermore, research also shows that adults working with children on homework increases the benefits for student achievement and attitudes about school. (See, for example, Policy Studies Associates' recent *Research Review: Educational Uses of Time*, 1992.)

However, in this era of limited afterschool adult supervision, students' incentive to do homework may be low. According to an informal survey of more than 100 school systems around the country, many communities have developed programs that aim to improve students' attention to and success with homework assignments. To a varying extent, these programs also aim to promote parent involvement in academic work completed by their children at home and in activities planned for parents at school. Four types of programs predominate:

- Recorded messages conveyed by voice mail
- Live telephone homework help services
- Live cable television shows that include on-air or behind-the-scenes telephone support for callers
- Drop-in homework help centers located at schools or community centers

Recorded Messages. Several hundred schools in the country have installed voice mail systems that permit parents and students to call for taped messages left by teachers with a description of classroom activities and daily homework assignments. Parents and students telephone the system and use menus or codes to reach the message of interest. Some systems answer with a "bulletin board" message that plays before the menu options are listed to tell callers about school news or upcoming events. Some include the option to leave a message for a teacher. Some have an out-calling feature that permits school

personnel to specify certain groups of students to receive a taped, computer-delivered message at home after school. For instance, a teacher can have the system call to remind parents about a class activity, or the transportation manager can have the system let affected families know about a bus delay. A few schools are experimenting with a system that has a menu option that connects the caller to a teacher who is on call—though at home—for the afternoon.

The cost of recorded message systems varies according to the complexity of the system and its level of use. Prices range from about $3,500 to $11,000, plus a $15 to 30 per month telephone fee. Companies offering similar services on a subscription basis charge about $1.50 per student per year. The expense of operating a system may be reduced by many factors, including the use of existing hardware and telephone line configurations. Some schools enlist local businesses to sponsor the service or share its cost, in return for including a brief commercial message on the system.

Dial-a-Teacher Services. The prototype of telephone call-in services is the Dial-a-Teacher program operated for more than 12 years by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City. A team of teachers operates a phone bank on schooldays from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. on Mondays through Thursdays during the school year. They usually work out of a facility that has telephones, writing and calculating materials, and easy access to a central collection of texts and reference books. To encourage callers to view this as a helping service, not an answering service, teachers *lead* students to their own answers, rather than simply provide them. As many as 10 percent of the calls in a session may be teacher follow-ups on an earlier student-initiated contact. Because these programs use regular teachers, responses typically include references to materials and subject-area connections familiar to the students.

Nearly all dial-a-teacher services keep logs—usually computerized—of each call, showing the date, the type of caller (i.e., student, parent, sibling, other), the school and grade, the subject of the question, and additional comments. Some services also record the time and length of the call, the language in which the conversation was conducted, and information about call-backs. Most use these data to generate daily, monthly, or yearly reports. Most dial-a-teacher programs pay the professional staff an hourly rate, often set in the main bargaining agreement, but some pay a flat fee, and a few use teacher volunteers. With few exceptions, regardless of the pay, programs recruit and screen teachers carefully. Even the most highly paid teachers earn relatively

little in the course of a program season, but the consensus of most program operators is that paying teachers—rather that employing volunteers—makes for a more reliable, skilled, and respected program staff.

Some telephone hotlines are staffed by volunteers from businesses or secondary and postsecondary institutions. These are valued by educators in the community, but are reported to be sometimes less dependable both in terms of competence and attendance. Often, high school honors students and college students staff such programs, usually under the supervision of an teacher.

Cable Television Programs. Many districts use their own studios and cable or public access channels to broadcast live homework help shows that usually include opportunities for viewers to receive help from teachers on telephones during and after broadcast time. Using paid technical staff and teachers on-camera and answering phones, such programs air between 3:00 and 7:00 Mondays through Thursdays. Each day's schedule may include content-oriented segments of 30 or 60 minutes, accompanied and/or followed by supplementary off-camera call-in services. Programs are broadcast live from 28 to 35 weeks a year (depending on funding).

The cost of cable programs depends on the extent to which technical facilities and services, personnel, and cable access are provided as contributions. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for instance, budgets $500 for a one-hour show broadcast from its own studios; this includes pay for on-air and behind-the-scenes teachers. Local cable access is usually free, but a few producers are experimenting with satellite transmissions for larger viewing areas, which can add about $1,000 an hour to costs.

Homework Drop-in Centers. Students in a few districts find homework assistance in school or community libraries, often coordinated with other services such as hotlines or television shows. For instance, the LaPorte Federation of Teachers operates its telephone hotlines out of the high school library. Students in the National Honor Society meet their community service requirements by providing on-site tutoring to students who drop in for help. Because adult education classes also meet at the school, the program often serves adults as well as children. Drop-in centers are more likely to be operated by volunteers, both students and adults, and to be started by

community organizations, than are other types of homework help services. Costs are usually minimal.

In many public housing projects, the housing authorities or "delegate agencies" (to whom they lease or contribute space for services that benefit residents) operate community service or education centers whose programs provide afterschool homework help and tutoring. Federal policy supports allocation of a share of federal public housing resources for such activities. In Maryville, Tennessee, for example, a large apartment has been converted to an education center that serves the whole housing development population with programs scheduled all day and throughout the year. The afterschool program offers snacks, tutoring, and opportunities to play educational and other games on the computers when assignments are completed. The Chicago Housing Authority, under the auspices of the "Cluster Initiative" involving several social service agencies, will soon open study centers in four of the Robert Taylor development buildings. Parents will be trained to supervise educational activities as part of a parent education program, and they will manage many of the centers' programs.

Suggestions for Communities Considering Using Homework Help Services

In general:

Communities with extensive experience in providing homework help services recommend several guidelines for starting and maintaining effective systems:

- Involve teachers, administrators, parents, and community members in identifying the goal of the service. Voice mail services attract a high rate of use but usually provide no direct instructional assistance. Telephone and cable television programs provide instruction but deal directly with fewer students. Each has implications for teacher workloads that should be understood and addressed in order to secure full cooperation and effective implementation.

- Allocate resources sufficient to assure that all potential users know how and when they can use the service. Business partners can often be very helpful with this aspect of the program. Programs that reach the targeted audience use three to five different publicity strategies, among them stickers, public service announcements on radio and television, pencils, and ads on pizza boxes and grocery bags.

- Provide for regular assessment and use the results to improve the program and to share successes with sponsors and patrons. Collect success stories; broadcast them widely. Invisible programs lose support.

- Locate a site already effective in using the voice mail, dial-a-teacher, cable television, drop-in service, or configuration of planned services and solicit advice on start-up and maintenance routines.

If adopting a voice mail system:

- Implement monitoring and retraining plans to ensure that teachers' messages will encourage regular home use. Use the start up training offered by vendors. The evidence is very clear that outdated or negative messages dampen parent interest in communication.

- Adapt menu options to your school's special needs.

- Survey users regularly to keep the system responsive.

- Install the number of telephone lines recommended by the vendor for the size of the community; if users get a busy signal regularly when they try to use the system, it will adversely affect rates of usage.

- Collaborate with local businesses to reduce costs by sharing lines or getting corporate sponsors.

If implementing a dial-a-teacher program or telephone support for a cable program:

- Use skilled, experienced teachers who are familiar with the relevant curriculum, and negotiate a stipend that reflects the importance of competence and reliability.
- Use telephone lines that operate from one number.
- Equip the service area with the text and reference books that are relevant to student questions.

If initiating a cable television program:

- Use teachers with exceptional presentation skills.
- Include a live call-in component that is managed by behind-the-scenes personnel who screen incoming calls and refer them to the on-air teacher or other teachers.
- Be prepared to teach a short, interruptable lesson if students don't call during a show.

The following pages list sites for each type of homework help system. They represent a small sample of a group that numbers in the hundreds:

Voice Mail Home/School Communication Systems

Los Naranjos Elementary School
1 Smoketree Lane
Irvine, California 92714
(714) 552-5171

Los Naranjos Elementary School uses Advanced Voice Technologies' *Homework Hotline*, with reported success in increasing rates of home/school contact and homework completion.

Matalija Junior High School
703 El Paseo
Ojai, California 94023
(805) 640-4355

This junior high uses Advanced Voice Technologies *Homework Hotline* voice mail system with three kinds of messages: school and classroom news; homework assignments; and a menu of tips on how to deal with 15 common problems of young adolescents. The system's $11,000 installation costs were funded out of the school's "supplemental grants" account. About 600 students attend the school; the system receives an average of 350 calls per day. Teachers spend a few minutes each day updating messages.

Classroom Connection
Carrollton City Schools
123 Brown Street
Carrollton, Georgia 30117
(404) 834-1868

Carrollton schools use the telephone lines of the local Citizens' Bank and Trust for their voice mail system from Cornerstone Communications. Teachers from each of the city's six elementary and secondary schools leave daily messages accessible by entering a code after dialing the system's number. Because the shared lines are available only after the bank closes, families may access the system from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. daily.

Saunders Middle School
Prince William County, Virginia
(703) 670-9185

Funded by a parent-teacher organization two years ago, this telephone voice mail set up by the school's principal gives out homework assignments and makes general school announcements. The program, which operates for a cost of about $2,000 a year, serves about 1,000 students in grades 6-8. Approximately 500 to 700 calls are received each night from both parents and children.

Dial-a-Teacher Programs

Homework Hotline
Denver Public Schools
975 Grant Street
Denver, Colorado 80203
(303) 764-3580

Eight paid teachers operate Denver's telephone homework hotline for four-and-one-half hours a day Mondays through Thursdays during the school year. Originally designed for Denver-area students in grades K-12, the hotline now serves students statewide through an 800 number. The program responds to about 600 calls daily and 60,000 per year. Program costs—about $125,000 a year—are underwritten by Columbia Savings, McDonald's, and US West; KCNC-TV and other local businesses provide free publicity.

Regional Homework Hotline
799 Silver Lane
Trumbull, Connecticut 06611
(203) 459-1250

Bridgeport Education Association's Homework Hotline operates from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. Five paid teachers answer 40 to 50 telephone calls a session from the 10,000 students in the calling area. The Bridgeport Board of Education pays teacher stipends, and $7,500 in contributions from the Connecticut Education Association and the National Education Association cover other annual program expenses.

Homework Helper
Chicago Public Schools
1819 W. Pershing Road
Chicago, Illinois 60609
(312) 535-8435

Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago *Sun Times* cosponsor this daily telephone homework help service operated by volunteers from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m. Mondays. The *Sun Times* donates office space, phone lines, and, with other businesses, volunteers.

Marian Baun
Baton Rouge Dial-a-Teacher
4888 Loyola Drive
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70808
(504) 766-6453

Since September 1984, this homework hotline has provided assistance in math, English, science, and social studies with live cable call-ins from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., Mondays through Thursdays. Staffed by paid certified teachers and a paid student crew, Dial-A-Teacher is a school-community partnership involving the East Baton Rouge Parish public school system and funded by community groups and local businesses.

MCI Homework Hotline
Mercer County Department of Education
2238 Hamilton Avenue
Trenton, New Jersey 08619
(609) 588-5877

With support from the MCI Foundation, paid teachers operate a telephone homework hotline that responds to 50 to 75 calls during its 5:00 to 8:00 p.m. sessions Mondays through Thursdays. This service was begun in late 1991, so no annual budget has yet been established.

Dial-a-Teacher
United Federation of Teachers #2
260 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10010
(212) 777-7500

New York City has the oldest and largest homework help program in the country. It includes the Dial-a-Teacher telephone homework hotline operated by a team of 40 paid teachers from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. Parent workshops cover not only how to help with homework but also how to take a proactive role in education, and print materials show how to do some routine classroom assignments, such as book reports. UFT commissions an annual outside evaluation of its homework program. The budget for this entire program is about $500,000 a year, underwritten by UFT and the New York Board of Education.

Homework Hotline
Guilford County School District
120 Franklin Boulevard
Greensboro, North Carolina 27401
(919) 271-0700

A team of six paid teachers operates a telephone homework hotline from 4:30 to 8:30 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays for the 90,000 students in grades K-12 in the calling area. They receive more than 100 calls a session. The program's budget is about $35,000 a year for teacher stipends, in addition to in-kind contributions from local businesses worth more than $30,000.

Homework Hotline
Memphis Board of Education
2597 Avery Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee 88112
(901) 325-5411

All elementary, junior and senior high school academic areas are covered through this call-in hotline program that serves students (including K-12 and college) and parents. Sponsors include a local news station, local supermarket, and Memphis City Schools. Teams of district elementary and secondary teachers selected for their expertise answer the lines Monday through Thursday from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m.

Cable Television Homework Help Programs

Math Tips
District of Columbia Public Schools
20th & Franklin Streets NE
Washington, D.C. 20018
(202) 576-7818

Paid teachers staff the Math Tips cable television and telephone call-in program operating from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays during the school year. From 20 to 30 secondary students call each afternoon for help that is available in English or Spanish. Program costs, estimated at about $500 per week plus technical service expenses, are paid from local and federal funds.

John Moffey
Dial-a-Teacher and Homework Hotline
Dade County Public Schools, Room 268
1450 NE Second Street
Miami, Florida 33132
(305) 995-1822

Miami students receive homework help from a Dial-a-Teacher program operating from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. and cable television homework programs broadcast from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. Eight teachers respond to about 25,000 calls to Dial-a-Teacher each year; another 30,500 students call the staff of the television programs for individual assistance. The television programs parallel classroom lessons, and draw material from the questions asked by phone. Teacher stipends amount to about $25,000 per year, and the district spends about $150,000 annually on the cable television programs.

Extra Help
Cablevision of Boston/Brookline
179 Amory Street
Brookline, Massachusetts 02146
(617) 731-6127

From 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. Mondays through Wednesdays, paid teachers broadcast a series of live homework help shows, each focusing on a different subject and grade. Cablevision provides technical support and airtime and works closely with the district to make sure programs are aligned with the regular

curriculum. The programs receive about 120 calls each afternoon; a staff of teachers and others answer phones and either provide immediate assistance or route callers to the on-air teacher. The series has won several industry awards and nominations.

Regents Review Live
New York Network, SUNY
12th Floor, Smith Building/P0 Box 7012
Albany, New York 12225
(518) 443-5533

SUNY educational program producers initiated a set of pilot programs that reviewed material for the New York Regents examinations. For each course, they developed five two-hour segments broadcast over local cable channels and in some cases also over nearby networks. Although the program's intended audience are the 250,000 New York State students taking the Regents exam, the evidence from the pilots indicated that a much larger audience actually watched the show. In addition, many viewers called their local cable stations to ask for similar shows on other subjects. Each course costs about $15,000 to produce, and broadcasting is often supplied as a contribution by the cable stations.

Homework Hotline
Portland Public Schools
5210 North Kerby Street
Portland, Oregon 97217
(503) 280-5838

For six years, the Educational Service District—comprising six school districts including Portland and Multnomah counties—has been sponsoring this general subject hotline which appears on public access from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursdays. Paid teachers share duties appearing on and off the set. Guest tutors such as the governor and a local disc jockey help promote the show. Approximately 4,500 calls are fielded annually from October through May.

PCTV
1300 Western Avenue
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15233
(412) 322-7570

This call-in hotline, which started three years ago, was independently produced by a public access corporation, then subsequently picked up by a community group. Volunteer high school students field ten to twelve calls per show (mainly in math) from a viewer audience of 100,000. Langley High School—a teacher magnet—now manages the program.

Doug Hamilton, Executive Producer
Homework Helpline
Consortium of Educational Television
Evergreen School District
13905 NE 28th Street
Vancouver, Washington 98682
(206) 256-7311

Sponsored by a local cable company, a consortium of educational television, and a school district, Homework Helpline is a live, interactive cable television program that offers homework assistance and general information to students and families in the local cable service area. The program is cablecast on Tuesday through Thursday evenings from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m., and phone lines open at 6:30 p.m. Paid students and teachers run the program, which serves students from kindergarten through high school.

Homework Help Drop-in Centers

Chicago Housing Authority
3983 South Langley
Chicago, Illinois 60653
(312) 567-7758

Through collaborative activities undertaken as part of the Chicago Cluster Initiative, the public housing authority is about to open study centers in four buildings of the Robert Taylor Homes in the attendance area served by

DuSable Cluster schools. The principals of nearby elementary schools worked with parents to choose the sites and design their furnishings. In addition, the housing authority dedicates space in five developments for public library branches and in several others for Boys and Girls Club centers that offer afterschool supervised study and tutoring.

Juanita James, Manager of Resident Initiatives
Omaha Public Housing Authority
3010 R Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68107
(402) 444-4781

This agency operates four study centers located in public housing developments for use by students who are residents. The centers are open from 4:30 to 7:00 p.m. daily and are staffed by volunteers from the wider community. Three of the centers have 10 or more computers contributed by business sponsors, including US West Foundation and Mutual of Omaha.

Maryville Housing Authority
100 Broadway Towers
Maryville, Tennessee 37801-4757

In addition to operating a study center used all day for adult courses and from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. for homework assistance, Maryville Housing Authority offers prizes—including a month's free rent—for families of students who attain high academic standards and/or perfect attendance each semester. The Center's staff includes high school and college cadet teachers who work as volunteers.

Dial-a-Teacher
LaPorte High School
602 F Street
LaPorte, Indiana 46350
(219) 362-3102; (219) 326-1924

Volunteer teachers and students operate a telephone and drop-in homework help service in the library of LaPorte High School from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays. The program's budget is about $20 a week to pay for clerical and custodial support provided by students. Tutors are members of the National Honor Society who volunteer as part of their community service requirements. Library and audio visual services are available to night school classes.